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WILLITON RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL.

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT.

Minehead, February 21st, 1904.

The Chairman of the Williton Rural District Council:

SIR,

I beg to present my report on the health of the western division of the district during the past year. Owing to the outbreak of scarlet fever in Minehead and the risk of the surrounding district being infected, attention has been called to the need of an isolation hospital for the division, or rather, as the need of an isolation hospital has already been recognised, the provision of temporary accommodation while the scheme for a permanent hospital is being carried to completion has become a question of urgency. So many considerations have, however, to be taken into account, occasioning so many delays, that at the end of the year no definite action had been taken on the matter. It is not a question that can be settled hastily, for it is necessary that the temporary hospital should be accessible from all the parishes included in the area covered by the conjoint scheme, and it must not be too far distant from the medical officer appointed. It is a matter for much regret that in the minds of most people the danger of infection arising from the proximity of an isolation hospital should be so much exaggerated, for if such accommodation be provided at too great a distance from the homes of the people for whom it is intended it would be impossible to induce the relatives to send the patients so far away, a difficulty, which under more favourable circumstances, remains acute so long as the policy of charging for admission is persisted in. The Local Government Board advise that no such charge be made, and I cannot too strongly support this advice. Of course, the absence of such a charge increases the expense of the upkeep of the hospital, but it to a far greater degree increases the efficiency of the institution as a means of keeping the district free from epidemics of infectious disease. A well-arranged and well-conducted isolation hospital should certainly not tend to increase the number of infectious cases within its immediate neighbourhood, the experience of the London fever hospitals supporting this contention. More difficulties are naturally to be encountered in the case of a temporary hospital, but they are not nearly so great as is generally supposed, and certainly should not prove insurmountable. Fortunately, what was so much feared has not come to pass; indeed, the division has been freer from infectious disease than for some years past, but it is well to be prepared beforehand, and it must be kept in mind that such isolation accommodation as the district can afford would be of little use once an epidemic had developed, although means of isolating a few cases might prevent disease ever reaching the proportions of an epidemic.

I have devoted some space to the foregoing preliminary remarks because the subject has loomed large in the public mind this year, and because, in spite of the isolation in which the rural population live, the advantage thereby gained in the treatment of infectious disease is counterbalanced by the scant accommodation for the treatment of not only such disease but all other serious ailments to be found in many of the cottages, where it is rare to find a fire-place in a bedroom. The bedrooms more frequently than not communicate directly one with another. Before leaving the subject of the housing of the rural population, I would like to express my agreement with the opinion of the medical officer of health for the eastern division, expressed in his report of last year, that much ill-defined sickness is connected with the faulty sanitary arrangements of these cottages.

Water Supply.—A new water supply has been provided for Wootton Courtenay. It was much needed, and should prove of great benefit to the village. Porlock suffers from a dearth of water in the dry months at the height of the hunting season, and to remedy this condition Mr. Blathwayt offered to augment the supply from some new works he has had carried out in Allerpark Combe. After inspecting the works, I was unable to recommend the acceptance of this offer until greater precautions had been taken to protect the sources of supply. Nogotiations have since been continued, but, I believe, without any definite result being yet arrived at. I hope such objections as exist will be overcome, and thus an offer in many respects so advantageous to Porlock be rendered possible of acceptance.

Sewerage, Drainage, and Excrement Disposal.—This is unsatisfactory in many of the villages. It is to be hoped that now Wootton Courtenay has a new water supply it will devote attention to its sewerage, which stands in much need of improvement. This is of all the greater importance now that each summer finds the village more frequented by visitors. There has been no further complaint from Carhampton, so that the alterations made last year may be assumed to be acting satisfactorily, but in the course of a few years other arrangements will be needed. The septic tank at Dunster has proved satisfactory, although, with so much storm water to deal with last year, it has been somewhat difficult to regulate. Complaints continue to be received of the objectionable smell arising from the drainage of Victoria-terrace, Alcombe. This matter has been dealt with in previous reports and the condition of affairs should be remedied. The main drainage of Alcombe is also unsatisfactory, the sewage tending, instead of passing onwards to the sea, to collect a short distance from the outlet in the neighbourhood of Floral-terrace, and there covering a considerable area. This stagnant sewage cannot but be most dangerous to health.

Prevalance of Disease.–103 deaths from all causes, namely, croup, 1; enteric fever, 1; epidemic influenza, 4; enteritis, 4; erysipelas, 1; other septic diseases, 1; phthisis, 12; other tubercular diseases, 2; cancer, 8; bronchitis, 11; pneumonia, 5; heart disease, 9; apoplexy, 8; appendicitis, 2; intestinal obstruction, 4; all other diseases, 12.

Death-rate, 15·68 per 1000; zymotic death-rate, 0·45 per 1000. Of the 103 persons whose death was recorded, no less than 55 had reached their 65th year, and mean cases a much greater age was attained. This would be a very satisfactory record were it not also an indication of the steady depletion of the rural districts of their young men and women.

Births, 128; boys, 66; girls, 62; birth-rate, 19·48 per 1,000; infantile death-rate, 70.31 per 1,000 births registered.

Seventeen cases of infectious disease were notified, viz.:—Diphtheria, 4; erysipelas, 6; scarlet fever, 6; enteric fever, 1. Two cases of diphtheria occurred at Periton and 2 cases at Porlock. Of the cases of scarlet fever notified, 4 were at Alcombe and 2 in the Minehead rural district. Two cases of erysipelas were reported from Roadwater, while there was a case each at Luxborough, Washford, Leighland, and Timberscombe. The case of enteric fever in the Minehead rural district was imported. Scarlet fever appeared at Alcombe before it was present in Minehead, but the case at Periton was probably introduced from Minehead. Owing to an outbreak of measles at Carhampton, the schools were closed for one month. The outbreak was of a mild character and caused no deaths.

Disinfection.—The present means of disinfection cannot be regarded as satisfactory, for in many of the cottages it is impossible to so seal up the infected rooms as to make disinfection by formalin vapour effectual, and no attempt is made to deal with passages and staircases. To carry out the work thoroughly requires more time than your inspector can personally devote to it, and I would recommend that, when disinfection of any premises is needed, he should be instructed to employ a man to carry out the work under his superintendence. This is the plan adopted by the Minehead Urban District Council with satisfactory results. I would further recommend that an "æquifex" spray be provided, with which passages and other parts of the premises not capable of being disinfected with formalin vapour could be sprayed with some disinfecting solution.

Dairies, Milkshops, and Cowsheds.—It is with much regret that I again have to report that owing to pressure of work I have been unable to proceed further with the question of the registration of dairies and milkshops. This is a matter of considerable importance, and one on which I hope at an early date to report fully to the Council. Your inspector reports to me verbally that many of the cowsheds are most unsatisfactory as to ventilation and drainage, a view which I am able to support by personal observation. It is all-important that the milk supply of the community should not be liable to all manner of infection, yet the manner of handling the milk, however good it may be in many respects, is in this one respect very bad. I have found sickness occurring in the house of a cowman, without his employer making any inquiry as to its nature, while in another case clothes were found hanging up in a dairy! Small matters in the minds of many people, yet what possibilities of infection of the milk are here to be found!

Slaughter-houses and Bakehouses.—Visited by your inspector and found fairly clean. "Fairly clean" are not the words you would wish to find in the report. I hope another year I shall be able to substitute the words "quite clean."

I am sir, your odedient servant,

GORDON HENRY,

Medical Officer of Health.